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November 23, 1994

Long concealed, largely unknown, factors affecting the decision to drop the Bomb:

--High-level indifference to the fate of Japanese civilians, expressed in the launching of the fire-bombing campaign, the lack of controversy about it in the USG, and as a consequence of this campaign: prospective casualties from the atom-bombs seemed merely an addition (though, a doubling!) to these already-accepted consequences of our strategy.

On the other hand, two puzzling phenomena: a) frequent comments, even in private diaries or memcons, indicating a desire not to attack civilian targets and a confidence that this was not happening: even while this was actually going on on a massive scale.

b) Apparent unawareness of the destruction of Japanese civilians and cities long after this had occurred, at highest civilian levels.

Is it really possible that hst, Stimson, Churchill were unaware of the policy or its effects? Were they writing and speaking--even in diaries or private conversations--for the record? Were they this capable of double-think, or denial?

In any case, the effective indifference meant there was little opposition, or the basis for it, to the prospect of destroying two or three more Japanese cities, nor little interest in averting this if possible.

--A number of high-level officials had various reasons for wanting to see the Bomb dropped on a city, and were prepared to see the war prolonged--at the cost of some American lives and of Soviet entry into the war (which they would have preferred to avoid)--in order to bring this about.

Among the motives which could only be satisfied by an actual attack:

--Intimidation of the Soviets, in postwar relations in Europe. (Byrnes, hst, Stimson, Groves)
. (Consciously or not, a need to demonstrate US willingness to use the Bomb on people: especially, when not vitally needed. This is the message that Stalin got, spurring him into a crash effort).

--Justification of the \$2 billion MP effort (Groves, the other top scientists, Oppenheimer, Byrnes, hst. (Hershberg points out that however the war ended, Stimson would have justified his own role, as head of the War Department; but the others in the MP would not, unless the Bomb played a role. HST would have been responsible for the investment, along with FDR.)

(I conjecture that this especially applied to the plutonium effort, which may have been a special incentive to drop the Nagasaki bomb before the war ended).

--For the bomb scientists and Groves: justifying their own involvement in a bomb project--with its dangers for the future--and their own sense of contribution to the war and importance.

--Demonstrating to the publics of the world the need for international control of nuclear energy and weapons, supposedly. Conant, Oppenheimer, others.

--Obscuring or averting US need to modify UCS and offer to keep the Emperor.

--Maximising ability to demonstrate and measure the actual destructive impact of the Bomb (reflected in careful choice of targets, sparing of potential targets earlier, and emphasis on daylight, precision bombing in good weather).

--In presenting protests (if it does), the Smithsonian should make clear that what they were recommending was an alternative to use of the bomb which might have ended the war earlier and with fewer American casualties. (Recall Nixon's use of the POW issue as a reason to continue and expand the war, generating more POWs and prolonging their captivity! How many POWs were captured under Nixon--and how long?!]

Also, the Grew-Forrestal-McCloy proposal should be layed out, with Stimson's acknowledgement of its potentialfor shortening the war. (I take it that Bart Bernstein believes that an offer to the emperor could really have shortened the war and averted the bomb--though he does not conclude that the critical decision-makers believed this.)

--What would it have taken to make a difference, to stop the Bomb?

Sherry implies: Use was over-determined. [This is a hidden fact, unknown to the public, and contrary to the Stimson official account, and Truman's, which imply a single, overriding factor.] Making one argument more forcefully, or invalidating another, would not have affected the outcome: "Only some shock to an enire system of values would have altered history. There was a parallel to the firebombing. In both cases, the action taken did not hinge on the views of influence of one or a few men or on the persuasiveness of one argument. If one argument was weak, others were mobilized. If, for example, a more convincing case had been presented for the feasibility of a noncombat demonstration of the bomb, it would have changed few minds, partly because men had different reasons for using the bomb and each had several. Above all, no one at the top regarded the bomb's use as an open question." {i.e., its eventual use, if needed, and if other alternatives had failed. Szilard's

petition, perhaps; but even that presumed that it was not necessary.) (p. 330, Rise of American Airpower)

After Tokyo, a moral argument (like the petition) weighed little, with most officials (unlike the signers) accepting the morality and acceptability of the prior bombing.

And the plausible judgments of Franck and Szilard--which look correct in retrospect--were countered at the time by contrary judgments of Conant and Oppenheimer (and Compton?) who were more influential. Had all the scientists agreed...they still would have run up against the political judgments of Byrnes and Truman and Stimson (though the latter would have gone along with Grew: as would, perhaps, FDR, had he lived). If FDR had lived three more months...maybe...

Also over-determined: reluctance to take measures that might have ended the war before the Bomb could be used. (Recall Stavins' belief that American officials have acted out an impulse to launch a nuclear strike. But this desire has not--yet--been consummated since Nagasaki.

No "responsible official" (Stimson's phrase) had a strong desire to avert the bombing--with the exception of Bard (what about McCloy? Leahy?) (Ike wasn't "responsible," despite his prestige: and it's not clear whether he really pressed his case). (Only Szilard's petitioners: and Franck: contrary to Sherry). None except the latter said unconditionally not to bomb, even given the assumption that it was not necessary to win acceptable terms.

Key issue: Truman/Byrnes' refusal (despite high-level recommendations) to articulate surrender terms to the Japanese before before using the Bomb, instead of after using it. (Even though this meant delaying expressing these terms till after the Soviets had entered the war, which was no longer desired after July 17 and which was understood to be likely to cause the Japanese to approach the US directly and to be willing to limit their demands to the retention of the Emperor: which might have been sufficient even earlier).

The real issue was not failing to "warn" the Japanese, but failing to inform them of our demands. (It was not even a matter of "lessening" our demands or making concessions, relative to an unconditional surrender formula--since on balance we wanted to preserve the Emperor, to facilitate surrender and postwar order--but of spelling out our maximal terms, reasssuring the Japanese only against exaggerated (though plausible) fears.

--Sherry: Hoover "among others interested in a compromise on surrender terms [not, on promoting use of the Bomb!], circulated predictions that invasion would take "500,000 to 1,000,000 lives," Marshall's staff dismissed the figure as 'entirely too high,' one that "appears to deserve little consideration." 335.

--Is there any calculation in the records of casualties or killed for Honshu? {check Miles, Bernstein]

Was there detailed planning for Honshu? (There was no decision by Truman, even tentatively. Note those--not only Kai Erikson--who say that it would have been wrong, and would not have been chosen, to invade Honshu. But doesn't that suppose that Japanese would have offered acceptable surrender terms short of that? That is what most or all expected; but was it certain?

After July 17, did Truman go through a period in which he didn't believe he would have to "compromise on the emperor"? (Sherry, 336). Does this mean, he didn't want to, or might not want to, keep the Emperor? Or simply that he didn't want to make a public offer? Especially, before using the Bomb?

--Sherry, 339: [IS THE TRUMAN DIARY ENTRY OF JULY 17 IN THE SMITHSONIAN EXHIBIT: FINI JAPS WHEN THAT COMES ABOUT? "Damning evidence against his later claim that he thought use of the bomb necessary to avert a horrible invasion."

Why not delay Bomb for a few days or weeks? (It wouldn't have affected Russian role in the war or occupation, since Russians couldn't have been kept out of Manchuria anyway).

Hyp: The Bomb may have shortened the war by a week or two:

(a) by increasing the willingness (beyond the effect of the Soviet entry) of the military hard-liners to defer to the Emperor's direct involvement;

(b) and/or: by getting the military, and perhaps even the civilians and Emperor, to accept the vague US indications of willingness to keep the Emperor as sufficient.

On the other hand, both of these might have occurred after the Soviet entry without the Bomb, just as quickly; and the US formula on the Emperor (or a more explicit one) might have been sufficient even earlier (as Grew believed, and as Stimson came to suspect, as expressed in 1948).

It seems unlikely that they would have held out very long after the Soviet entry, under continued blockade and bombing, even without the Bomb; i.e., more than weeks. That is implied by Truman's diary entry of July 17 (not public till...1968? later?). His entry the next day, that the Bomb might lead to surrender even earlier, indicated that he meant to use the bomb to shorten the war by about a week, during which no US lives need be expended). In other words, the casualty estimates he heard on June 18 were simply irrelevant by July 17-18 and July 25...(by which time he had seen new cables, and when he rejected all the elements in the Potsdam Declaration that might have ended the war even sooner than August).

As of July 26 or so: a) Truman expected the war would be over

soon after AUGust 15, without the Bomb (he did not believe the Bomb was "necessary" to avert invasion, end the war on acceptable terms, save American lives, or to shorten the war appreciably).

b) he had been advised by most of his top advisors to issue terms and warnings at Potsdam that most of them believed could well, or would probably, end the war immediately, before the Bomb was available.

He chose neither to try to end it immediately, nor to wait on the Bomb till August 20 or so (when it would most probably prove unnecessary), but to use it as soon after August 1 as possible, in hopes of ending the war a week or two before it would otherwise end.

The big issue debated earlier seriously was when to issue our terms of surrender: i.e., to acknowledge our willingness to keep the Emperor. Before or after the Bomb had been tested; or, before or after it had been used. (The question of warning was considered much less, but somewhat; it was much less important, except in connection with the above assurance).

(Did anyone ever suggest waiting till the Soviets had entered, before using it?)